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AUTHOR Escoe, Adrienne S., Ed.
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ABSTRACT

Generating writing ideas is often a serious obstacle for students. Some classroom techniques to help them out of this dilemma include word associating and self-questioning. Students can also construct a matrix chart with the subheadings from their information resources. Once ideas are generated, they can be arranged in appropriate presentation order. If students have generated many words, the related ideas can be clustered into large circled groups and then ordered within those clusters. If few words have been generated, they may be put in order with arrows or numbers. Students may also write each idea on a card, then physically reorder or "shuffle" them to test different arrangements. Students' ability to arrange is facilitated by knowledge of specific arrangement plans (spatial ordering for description, chronological ordering for storytelling, and order of importance for news stories of persuasion). To provide students with more practice time for writing, teachers can reallocate a portion of the time devoted to reading. Other techniques for increasing writing practice without increasing the paper load include freewriting, journal writing, sentence combining, and peer critiquing. (HTH)

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GETTING BETTER WRITING AND MORE WRITING WITHOUT INCREASING THE PAPER-GRADING LOAD

SWRL INSTRUCTIONAL IMPROVEMENT DIGEST

No. 5 1982

Adrienne S. Escoe
Editor

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SWRL
INSTRUCTIONAL IMPROVEMENT DIGEST

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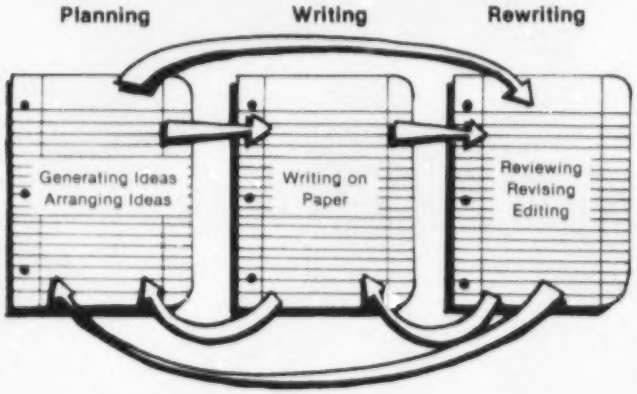
GETTING BETTER WRITING AND MORE WRITING WITHOUT INCREASING THE PAPER-GRADING LOAD

Teachers and researchers often describe the writing process in three stages: planning, writing, and rewriting. And these stages have subparts: When writers plan, they must generate and arrange ideas; after they have written their ideas on paper, they must review, revise, and edit their text. However, the process is not linear; it does not move in a straight line from planning to writing to rewriting. All planning is not done when ideas are written on paper; all writing is not finished before writers review and revise; all revising is not complete before any editing begins. Writers move back and forth among these subprocesses. For example, after text has been composed on paper, the writer may notice a gap for which new content must be planned.



This article discusses some ways to help students with two of the important subprocesses of planning: generating and arranging. Then it gives some tips on getting students to write more without increasing your paper load; in fact, these suggestions may even help decrease your present paper load.

Generating Ideas

Generating ideas is often a serious obstacle for students (and for all writers for that matter)—students don't know how to get ideas for their compositions. Students commonly protest, "I can't think of anything to say." Using the techniques below can help them out of this dilemma.

Word Associating

An enjoyable way to generate ideas for composing is by word associating. Students can do it alone, in pairs, in small groups, or as a whole class. Word associating involves generating and recording words that are elicited by an object, idea, or event. For example, if students are going to write about baseball, they think of words that relate to the word "baseball" and write these words down. When the whole class is word associating, the words can be written on the chalkboard. When students have generated more associations than they need, they can then choose the words that represent ideas to include in their compositions. Choice can be determined by significance of the ideas and by their relation to each other. Students identify their selections by circling the ideas/words they want to use.

Idea-Generating Questions

Another simple technique that helps students generate ideas is self-questioning. Students ask themselves questions about a topic or broad area of interest in order to probe their own minds for ideas. Below are examples of idea-generating questions students can be taught to ask themselves. These questions are listed by some types of writing that students commonly undertake.

Some of the questions are very simple, such as those that students can ask themselves when they are going to describe something. Questions for writing a story are also relatively simple. The questions that students use when they are writing something factual are a little more difficult, but with practice, students can use these questions successfully. Even if they can't answer all the questions, those questions that students can answer will produce enough ideas to begin writing. The same qualification applies to the probes used for persuasive writing.

These sets of idea-generating questions are particularly helpful when they are displayed on the chalkboard, on the bulletin board, or on charts posted around the classroom. Then students can refer to the questions whenever they need help in generating ideas for writing.

Questions for Generating Content

Questions That Can Be Asked When Describing Something:

1. What does it look like?
   What size is it?
   What shape is it?
   What color is it?
2. What does it smell like?
3. What does it sound like?
4. What does it feel like?
5. What does it taste like?

Questions That Can Be Asked When Writing a Story:

1. What happened first?
2. What happened next? Next?
3. What happened last?
4. When did it happen?
5. Where did it happen?
6. Who did it happen to?

Questions That Can Be Asked When Writing Something Factual:

1. What is the topic?
2. What part of the topic should I write about?
3. How can I illustrate the topic?
4. What questions can I ask about the topic? What are the answers to these questions?
5. Do I have any problems with this topic?
6. What are the solutions to those problems?

Questions That Can Be Asked When Writing Something Persuasive:

1. What opinion can a person have about this topic?
2. Which of them is my opinion?
3. What reasons can others give to show that my opinion is wrong?
4. What reasons can I give to show that my opinion is right?
5. What can I say to prove that my reason is a good reason?

Matrix Constructing

A matrix is a chart that students construct to generate ideas. These ideas fit into cells at the intersections of the horizontal and vertical categories. A matrix can help students generate content from reference sources as well as probe their own minds for ideas. In generating content from reference sources, students record the information about the same subtopic as it is found in each source. Below are two examples of matrices: one is for generating content from reference sources; the other is for comparing the physical features of several characters in a story.

Example Matrix for Generating Content from Sources

Source	Definition of Igloos	Furnishings of Igloos
Seasons of the Eskimo Bremmer, Fred		
"Igloo" *World Book Encyclopedia*		
An Eskimo Family Silver-Burdett Company		

(Adapted from McKenzie, 1979, p. 785)

Matrix for Comparing Several Characters

Character	Size	Voice	Hair Color	Eye Color	Most Noticeable Feature
Character 1					
Character 2					
Character 3					

Arranging Ideas

Once ideas are generated, they can then be arranged in appropriate presentation order. Arranging is important because it contributes structure to the composition. A

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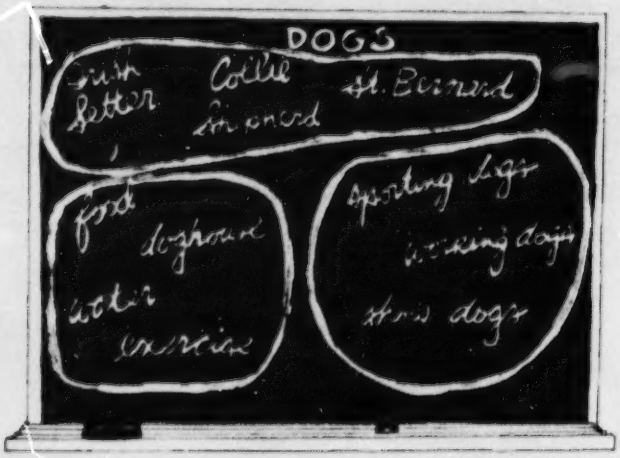
structure facilitates the writer's task and the reader's comprehension. To develop this structure, students must see ideas as part of a coherent whole; students must also perceive and then create superordinate and subordinate relationships. The strategies below help students with these cognitive processes.

Clustering

Clustering is a useful technique for ordering ideas that are generated by word associating. (In fact, some people use the term "clustering" to refer to both word associating and its concomitant ordering.) When students have generated many words, the related words are clustered into groups by larger circles and then ordered within those clusters. When few words have been generated, students may either draw arrows from one circled word to another or number the words in presentation order.



Shuffling

One strategy that helps students learn how to arrange their ideas is "card shuffling." Students write each idea on a separate card or small piece of paper as they think of an idea. Then they physically reorder the cards or papers, moving them around to test different arrangements until closely related ideas are on adjacent cards. The cards can even be arranged into groups of related ideas that deal with subtopics in a composition.

This procedure gives students considerable practice in arranging: Rearranging the cards is so easy that students need little urging to seek the best possible order for their ideas. Students are not reluctant to reorder topics and subtopics repeatedly, as they may be when many ideas are written consecutively on full pages.

Arrangement Plans

Students' ability to arrange is facilitated by knowledge of specific arrangement plans. For example, students need to use spatial ordering when they describe something; consequently, writing is improved when students learn to arrange their descriptive content into side-to-side order—"on the right side of the room..., in the corner..., in the middle of the room..., on the other side...." They should also learn that stories are arranged in chronological order; even a flashback is arranged chronologically within itself. Some factual writing is also arranged in chronological order, but the content often requires students to use other ordering. For example, news stories are arranged so that the most important information comes first; comparisons are arranged by the parts of the two or more things being compared. Older students need to know that persuasive writing is arranged by the effectiveness and importance of their arguments—usually from least to most effective and important.

Information about arranging and connecting ideas for some common kinds of student writing are presented below. Other arrangements are possible, but those below are ones frequently needed in school writing. After discussing this information with students, teachers can post it in the classroom for students' reference during composing.

Arranging Ideas for Describing

When you describe something, arrange the ideas in space order. You can describe from

- top to bottom, or bottom to top,
- left to right, or right to left,
- inside to outside, or outside to inside.

Connect your sentences and paragraphs with words that show space order, like *on top of, next to, beside, in the corner.*

Arranging Ideas for Storytelling

When you write a story, arrange your ideas so that you have a beginning, a middle, and an ending to the story. Tell the events of your story in the order that they happened. If you include a flashback, tell the events in the flashback in the order that they happen. Connect the sentences and paragraphs in your story with words that show time order, like *then, later that day, the next morning.*

Arranging Ideas for Informing and Explaining

When you write information or write to explain something, arrange your ideas in an order that makes the best sense for your topic.

For a comparison of two things:	Write about the same part of both things before you write about a different part, or write all your ideas about one thing and then all your ideas about the other thing.
For a newspaper report:	Arrange your ideas by how important they are—put the most important ideas first.

For directions:	Write the directions in the order that you do each step.
For a science report:	Tell what you did and what the results were.

Connect your sentences and paragraphs with words like *also, on the other hand, because, after that, next.*

Arranging Ideas for Persuading

When you want to persuade someone that your opinion is right, arrange your ideas in order of how important they are. You can also arrange them by writing.

- the reasons for and then the reasons against,
- the reasons against and then the reasons for.

Connect your sentences and paragraphs with words like *because, for that reason, also, next.*

Increasing Writing Practice Without Increasing the Paper Load

Teachers know and research confirms that students write better if they write every day. However, teachers who wish to provide more writing practice are immediately confronted with two problems:

1. Where to find time for writing in an already overscheduled day,

2. How to get students to write more, yet not have to grade more papers.

One solution to the first problem is to reallocate a portion of the time devoted to reading. Some teachers have made this adjustment, and their students' reading scores have gone up—students' reading improved when their time spent on writing increased (Graves & Murray, 1980). The second problem may be solved by several techniques presented below.

Freewriting

Freewriting is a good technique to give students regular practice in writing, yet it does not burden the teacher with additional paper grading (Elbow, 1973). Students are first given two constraints. Then they start writing, and they keep moving their pencils until they are told to stop. These are the two constraints:

1. Do not stop moving your pencil to think about spelling or punctuation or grammar or any of the rules.

2. Do not stop moving your pencil even if you can't think of anything to say—either just keep writing, "I can't think of anything to say," or repeat your last word over and over. Eventually you will find something to write about.

Unlike other writing assignments, freewriting is not looked at at all unless teachers have no other way to make sure that students have done their freewriting. It would be a mistake for a teacher ever to try to grade a freewriting assignment or read it for correctness. The purposes are simply to give students writing practice and to convince them that they do, indeed, have something to put down on paper.

Journal Writing

Another appropriate technique for ungraded writing is journal writing. Students write at least three sentences in a special notebook or notebook section at any time during each day. They write about something they see, think about, are confused about, or want to complain about. Some teachers collect the journals and write responses to the students; they respond to the content (to what students write about), not to the form (to the correctness of the writing). However, teachers may choose not to read the journals at all, allowing the students' writing to be private, personal reflections.

Keeping a journal gives students both important writing practice and first-hand experience with writing as a way of communicating. Teachers have found and studies have shown that students who keep journals and write in them regularly improve their writing dramatically over the duration of a school year (Staton, 1981).

Sentence Combining

Sentence combining is an instructional technique to help increase students' syntactic fluency: Students are given two or more simple sentences and taught how to combine them into one sentence. The sentence-combining technique and ideas for developing sentence-combining instruction are described in detail in an earlier *Instructional Improvement Digest* (No. 4).

This technique has an additional special application here—it can provide ungraded writing practice. Once students understand the principles of sentence combining, they can develop their own sentence-combining exercises. They can find them in their reading, in books and periodicals, or they can compose the exercises themselves. These student-generated exercises can then be distributed to the class for other students' writing practice. Not only will both problem-authors and problem-solvers get additional writing practice, but the problem-authors in particular will learn much about sentence structure as well.

Peer Critiquing

Peer critiquing is a strategy that reduces the teacher's paper-grading load because students do some of the reading of and commenting on other students' writing. (Procedures for implementing peer critiquing are described in *Instructional Improvement Digest* No. 2., "Write

Now—Change Later: Teaching Students to Revise.") Using peer responses does more than alleviate some of the teacher's evaluation burden. This technique also provides students with insights about their own writing, teaches them new writing techniques by exposing them to the different writing strategies used by their peers, and helps students become more perceptive about written language.

Summary

Students will write better if they understand how to generate and arrange their ideas. Students will write more, without increasing the paper-grading load, by doing freewriting, keeping journals, devising sentence-combining exercises, and critiquing their peers' work. And this is what teachers, students, and parents want—more writing and better writing.

—Ann Humes
Member of the Professional Staff
SWRL Educational Research and Development

Note: This article is an elaboration of the filmstrip "Helping Students Write Better and Write More" (SWRL Educational Research and Development, Los Alamitos, 1982).

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Comments

More Showing, Less Telling

One of the problems of student writing is the lack of concrete details, clear examples, or vivid description. Student writing often suffers from too many generalities, too much "telling" and not enough "showing." Here is a writing strategy that directly attacks this problem. In addition, it generates more student writing, with less paper work for the teacher, and yet emphasizes evaluation of student writing both from other students and from the teacher. It is applicable to a wide range of grade levels.

This writing unit ought to last several weeks, with assignments given just about every day, Monday through Thursday, for example. The daily routine is an important part of the unit.

Begin by giving a "telling" sentence: *My sister is a brat, My room is a mess, Math is hard, The pizza tasted good, The dragon's countenance was hideous.* These sentences may be found in student writing, classroom literature, or can be made up by the teacher. Ask students to begin their writing with these sentences. Their job is to "show" what the sentences "tell." Use any prewriting techniques that may be helpful at this time. After awhile, students may ask if they can move the "telling" sentences around or omit them altogether. At this point, the teacher may want to discuss **topic sentences** since these are what the students have been cued with.

On the following day, collect the papers and read aloud three to seven of them at random. Ask the students for critical remarks. You might begin with only asking for positive comments. The teacher records these comments on the paper, adding comments only if something good is missed. At this point, the teacher grades the paper. I usually put grades of only A through C, not grading or reading papers that are below C. Before the papers are handed back the next day, the teacher may read more papers at home for grades or to check a student's progress. I usually read five to seven papers, giving about ten total graded papers. During the unit, I usually allow students to choose two or three papers not to be counted. They write "Do Not Grade" at the top of the paper to indicate they are taking a bye on this particular assignment.

Many specific writing skills can be practiced, depending on the "telling" sentences chosen. I use them to teach vocabulary *(Estella was a supercilious person),* to practice comparison and contrast *(My mother is very different from my father),* and to help them write about literature *(Miss Havisham and Abel Magwitch were both motivated by vindictiveness).* This writing approach is especially effective in combining literature and writing. When reading a novel, for example, I give students some "telling" sentences about the setting and physical descriptions of characters.[1] Then I give them sentences about characters and their actions or motivations.[2] This is followed by comparison and contrast sentences,[3] and concluded with sentences about theme or writing techniques.[4]

[1] *Lennie was different.*

[2] *George and Lennie had a dream.*

[3] *The relationship between George and Lennie was similar to that of Candy and his dog.*

[4] *The title* ***Of Mice and Men*** *was an example of foreshadowing.*

Part of the success of this writing approach is in the immediate response to the students' writing by both other students and the teacher. It does not have to be a response to a particular stu-

Comments (cont.)

dent to be effective or affective. Concrete detail begins to increase, figurative language grows, clarity is improved, and all of this at no increase to the teacher's reading load.

(adapted from Rebekah Caplan, Teacher Consultant, Bay Area Writing Project)

William Burns, Chairman
English Department
Sonora High School
Fullerton Union High
School District
La Habra, California

Organizational Patterns of Writing

In addition to the writing ideas presented in this issue of the *Digest*, students also need instruction and practice with planning and writing longer papers. Longer papers often require a particular writing plan or organizational pattern. The plan or pattern (or combination of patterns) usually develops during the pre-writing stage as a natural outgrowth of an author's purpose and intended audience. For example, a *writer* describing a technical process in computer programming will use a pattern different from one that a social scientist will use in arguing a political theory. *Readers* must then detect the writer's dominant pattern(s) of organization as part of comprehending a message. Becoming consciously aware of the variety of organizational patterns as part of reading instruction can form the basis for guiding students' pre-writing strategies. This reading/writing connection, if pursued by teachers, can present students with additional purposes for attending to patterns other than for reading comprehension. One way to help students become familiar with a range of pattern options is to have them write a paragraph about an idea in different patterns, for different purposes and different audiences. Some of the more frequent organizational patterns useful to readers/writers include:

HOW-TO	—instructions for performing a particular task or process
DESCRIPTION	—describing the features of an experience, event, object, or feeling
PROBLEM-SOLVING	—introduce a problem and specific ways to solve it
ARGUMENTATIVE	—presenting a pro-con discussion of an issue with statements supporting one view in favor of the other
CAUSE-EFFECT	—explaining the interrelationship of two or more events

Consider how each writing pattern can be used for a single topic, for example "Participating in a Job Interview": the HOW-TO pattern can include information on what to wear and what to say; the DESCRIPTION pattern can include observations of the actual interview; and other patterns can be used in the same way. As students become familiar with various organizational patterns, they will benefit more from other instruction and practice with planning and writing longer papers.

Lyndon W. Searfoss
Associate Professor
Elementary Education
Arizona State University, Tempe

Thomas W. Bean
Associate Professor
Reading Institute
California State University, Fullerton

Readers' comments are always welcome.